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⑯ Polymerization inhibition.

⑯ A method for inhibiting the polymerization of an alpha-beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid during its recovery by distillation is disclosed.

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POLYMERIZATION INHIBITIONBACKGROUND OF THE INVENTIONField of the Invention

5 This invention relates generally to the recovery of an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid by distillation and, more particularly, concerns the inhibition of the polymerization of an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid during its
10 recovery by distillation.

Discussion of the Prior Art

15 Esters of alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acids are large volume chemicals prepared by esterification of the corresponding alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acids. In order to obtain such an ester of the desired purity, it is important that the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid starting material is sufficiently
20 pure. However, in the separation and purification of an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid under distillation conditions, it has been found that the acid tends to polymerize even when conventional inhibitors are present.

25 For example, recently interest has developed in the production of an ester of an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid by a process involving the reaction of a saturated aliphatic monocarboxylic acid of one less carbon atom and formaldehyde to form the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid. The reaction results in a mixture of the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid and the saturated aliphatic monocarboxylic acid of one less carbon atom, as well as other by-products such as alpha-, beta-unsaturated ketones, for example, 2,5-dimethyl-cyclopent-2-en-1-one. After separation of the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid from
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the saturated aliphatic monocarboxylic acid of one less carbon atom, the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid is esterified to form the ester of an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid.

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Esterification of the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid with an alcohol in the presence of the saturated aliphatic monocarboxylic acid of one less carbon atom leads to the formation of an 10 unwanted ester of the saturated aliphatic monocarboxylic acid of one less carbon atom. Therefore, it is essential to separate the saturated aliphatic monocarboxylic acid of one less carbon atom from the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid prior to contacting 15 the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid with the alcohol. However, the separation of the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid from the saturated aliphatic monocarboxylic acid of one less carbon atom by conventional methods such as distillation is difficult. For example, if distilled, the 20 alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid polymerizes readily upon the application of heat. The resulting solid polymer deposits form in the distillation column and in the interconnecting lines. These 25 deposits interfere with the efficient operation of the plant and eventually build up to such an extent that the plant must be shut down for cleaning.

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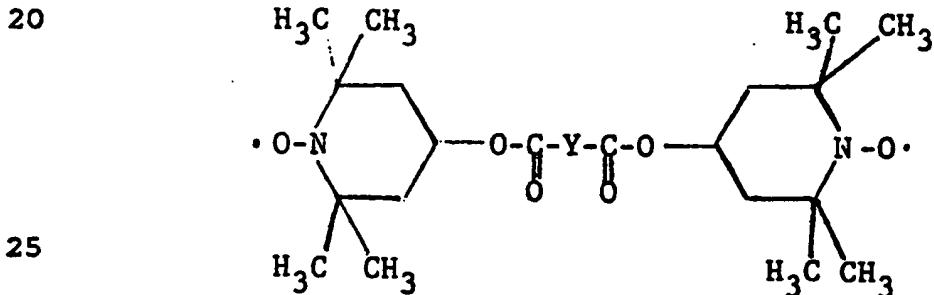
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Although the addition of inhibitors such as phenothiazine, benzogquinone, hydroquinone, 4-tertbutylcatechol, and p-phenylenediamine does reduce the polymerization of an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid under these conditions, such inhibitors require the presence of oxygen in the distillation column, which can reduce the efficiency of the separation being effected in the column and can create an explosive mixture in the vertical condenser of the column. In addition, if the distillation were performed

under reduced pressure, it would be difficult to keep a sufficient level of oxygen in the liquid phase.

5 Nitroxide radicals disclosed by O. L. Lebedev and S. N. Kazarnovski, Tr. po Khim. i Khim. Tekhnol 2,649-656 (1959) have been demonstrated by Bailey, U.S. Patent No. 3,747,988, to be suitable stabilizers against the polymerization of acrylonitrile under distillation conditions and in either the presence or absence of oxygen. However, such nitroxide radicals have never been employed to 10 stabilize an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid against polymerization under distillation conditions.

15 Related materials that have been employed to stabilize styrene and methyl methacrylate against polymerization at a temperature of 60°C during purification, storage and transport are disclosed in U.S.S.R. Inventor's Certificate No. 1027150 and are represented by the following general formula:



where Y is - NH - $(CH_2)_6$ - NH - or



Stable free radicals can, in principle, both initiate and terminate radical polymerization reactions. 35 With increasing temperature, their initiating action will become relatively more pronounced, because termination is a radical/radical r action requiring zero or a low energy

of activation, while the addition of a radical to a monomer usually requires energy of activation exceeding 5 Kcal./Mol. Thus, although stable nitroxide radicals are known, it is not obvious that the nitroxides of the present application would be particularly effective as polymerization inhibitors for an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid at relatively high temperatures (above 60°C).

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OBJECTS OF THE INVENTION

It is therefore a general object of the present invention to provide an improved method for recovering and purifying an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid by distillation which meets the 15 aforementioned requirements and solves the aforementioned problems.

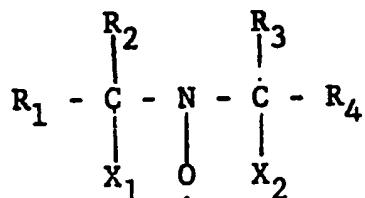
More particularly, it is an object of the present invention to provide an improved method for recovering and purifying an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated 20 monocarboxylic acid by distillation in which the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid is stabilized against polymerization.

Other objects and advantages of the invention will become apparent upon reading the following detailed 25 description and appended claims.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

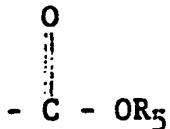
These objects are achieved by an improved process of the present invention for the purification of an alpha-, 30 beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid by distillation, comprising introducing into the distillation column a nitroxide radical having the essential skeletal structure:

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wherein each of R_1 , R_2 , R_3 and R_4 is an alkyl group containing from 1 to 15 carbon atoms, X_1 and X_2 are the same or different, and each of X_1 and X_2 is an alkyl group containing from 1 to 15 carbon atoms, halogen, cyanide,

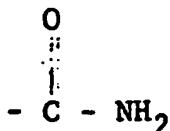
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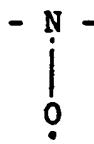
wherein R_5 is an alkyl group containing from 1 to 15 carbon atoms or an aryl group containing from 6 to 12 carbon atoms,

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20 $-S$, $-C_6H_5$, $-S-COCH_3$, $-OCOCH_3$, $-OCOC_2H_5$, or an alkenyl group containing up to 15 carbon atoms where the double bond is not in conjugation with the group

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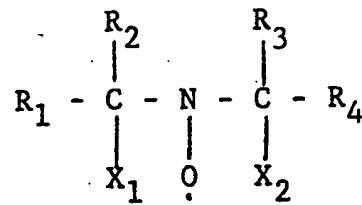


or X_1 and X_2 taken together form a ring.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

30 Thus, according to the present invention, there is provided a process for the recovery of an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid by distillation, which process comprises introducing to the distillation column a nitroxide free radical having the following essential skeletal structure:

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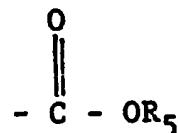
wherein R_1 , R_2 , R_3 and R_4 are alkyl groups and no hydrogen is bound to the remaining valencies on the carbon atoms bound to nitrogen.

10 The alkyl groups R_1 , R_2 , R_3 and R_4 may be the same or different, and contain 1 to 15 carbon atoms. It is particularly preferred to use a nitroxide radical in which R_1 , R_2 , R_3 and R_4 are methyl, ethyl or propyl groups.

15 The remaining valencies of the carbon atoms in the essential skeletal structure which are not satisfied by R_1 , R_2 , R_3 , R_4 or nitrogen may be satisfied by any atom or group except hydrogen which can bond covalently to carbon although some groups may reduce the stabilizing power of the nitroxide structure and are undesirable.

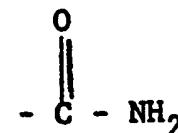
20 Thus, atoms or groups which are suitable as X_1 and X_2 are an alkyl group containing from 1 to 15 carbon atoms, halogen, cyanide, or

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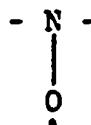
30 wherein R_5 is an alkyl group containing from 1 to 15 carbon atoms or an aryl group containing from 6 to 12 carbon atoms,

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-S, -C₆H₅, -S-COCH₃, -OCOCH₃, -OCOC₂H₅, or an alkenyl group containing up to 15 carbon atoms where the double bond is not in conjugation with the group:

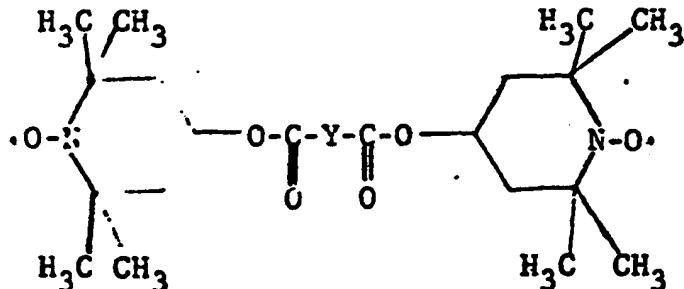
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10 X₁ and X₂ may also form part of a ring. Examples of suitable compounds having the aforesaid essential skeletal structure and in which X₁ and X₂ form part of the ring are the pyrrolidine-1-oxyls and the piperidine-1-oxyls, such as 2,2,6,6-tetramethyl-4-hydroxypiperidine-1-oxyl.

15 In addition, nitroxide radicals which are suitable for use in the method of this invention include compounds formed by the reaction of 2,2,6,6-tetramethyl-4-oxopiperidine-1-oxyl with hexamethylenediisocyanate or with the acyl dichloride of butylterephthalic acid as 20 described in U.S.S.R. Inventor's Certificate No. 1027150 and having the formula:

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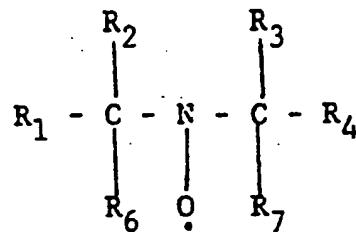


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where Y is - NH - (CH₂)₆ - NH - or

Where X₁ and X₂ are alkyl or alkenyl groups, the nitroxide radical employed in the method of this invention is represented by the following formula:

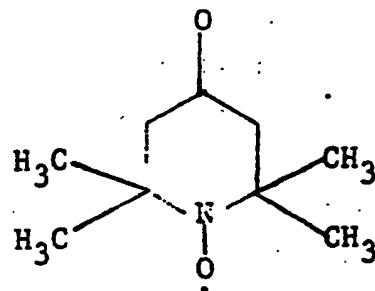
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where the groups R_6 and R_7 are alkyl or alkenyl groups. Examples of suitable groups R_6 and R_7 are methyl, ethyl and propyl groups, such as in the di-tert-butyl nitroxide radical.

10 Preferably, X_1 and X_2 taken together form a ring; more preferably, the nitroxide radical is a piperidine-1-oxyl or a pyrrolidine-1-oxyl radical, and most preferably, the nitroxide is 2,2,6,6-tetramethyl-4-15 oxopiperidine-1-oxyl of the formula:

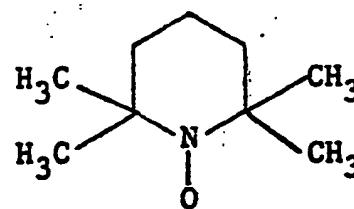
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or 2,2,6,6-tetramethylpiperidine-1-oxyl of the formula:

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The aforesaid nitroxide radicals may be prepared by the methods disclosed by O. L. Lebedev and S. N. Kazarnovski, Tr. po Khim. i Khim. Tekhnol. 2, 649-656 (1959) and in U.S.S.R. Inventor's Certificate No. 1027150.

Suitably, the aforesaid nitroxide radicals are employed in the method of this invention at a concentration in the range of from about 1 to about 10,000

preferably from about 50 to 5,000, parts per million parts of the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid, and do not require the presence of oxygen.

The aforesaid nitroxide radicals are suitable for 5 use over a wide range of temperatures, but typically the distillation temperature employed in the method of this invention is preferably in the range of from about 65°C to about 175°C, more preferably from about 90°C to about 150°C, and most preferably from about 120°C to about 10 150°C. The method of the present invention is performed at an absolute pressure in the range of from about 10 to about 1200 millimeters of mercury.

Of the various alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated compounds, it is generally recognized that methacrylic acid has one of the greatest tendencies to 15 polymerize, and it is extremely difficult to handle at elevated temperatures. In this regard, it has been found that the presence of certain reaction by-products greatly increase the propensity of methacrylic acid to polymerize. Specifically, the alpha-, beta-unsaturated 20 ketone by-products, such as ethylisopropenyl ketone and 2,5-dimethylcyclopent-^{-2-en-1-one} have been shown to greatly increase the degree of methacrylic acid polymerization.

For example, methacrylic acid alone polymerizes 25 after 80, 19 and 8 minutes of exposure to temperatures of 100°C, 120°C and 140°C, respectively; while methacrylic acid in its mixture with 2,5-dimethylcyclopent-2-en-1-one containing 1 weight percent of 2,5-dimethylcyclopent-^{-2-en-1-one} polymerizes after only 18, 5 and 2.5 minutes 30 of exposure to temperatures of 100°C, 120°C and 140°C, respectively. In these instances, the time of polymerization is defined as the first appearance of a cloudy solution; precipitation of solids generally followed the first appearance of a cloudy solution within about 30 35 sconds. Therefore, the benefits from the use of the aforesaid nitroxide radical in the method of the pres nt

invention are maximized when an alpha-, beta-unsaturated ketone such as 2,5-dimethylcyclopent-2-en-1-one is present in the distillation feedstock.

Although the method of the present invention can be employed for the recovery of an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid in general, it is preferred to practice the method of the present invention for the recovery of such alpha-, beta-unsaturated monocarboxylic acid prepared by the aldol-type condensation under vapor phase conditions at a temperature of about 280 to 350°C of (1) a saturated aliphatic monocarboxylic acid (such as acetic or propionic acid) of one less carbon atom than the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid product, and (2) a formaldehyd compound in the presence of a solid catalyst. While any suitable source of formaldehyde compound can be used, such as formalin, paraformaldehyde, methanolic formaldehyde, trioxane, etc., it is preferred to use substantially anhydrous formaldehyde, particularly cracked monomeric gaseous, substantially anhydrous formaldehyd .

A large number of catalysts exhibit activity in such an aldol-type condensation reaction. Specific catalyst materials that are useful in the process include synthetic alkali metal aluminosilicates, natural alkali metal aluminosilicates, synthetic alkaline earth metal aluminosilicates, natural alkaline earth metal aluminosilicates, alkali metal hydroxides on synthetic aluminosilicates, alkali metal hydroxides on natural aluminosilicates, alkaline earth metal hydroxides on synthetic aluminosilicates, alkali metal hydroxides on silica gel, alkaline earth metal hydroxides on silica gel, sodium silicate on silica gel, potassium silicate n silica gel, molybdenum oxide on silica gel, silica gel, synthetic manganese aluminosilicate, natural manganese alumin silicate, synthetic cobalt aluminosilicate, natural cobalt aluminosilicat , synth tic zinc aluminosilicate, and natural zinc aluminosilicate.

It is preferred to employ a catalyst comprising at least one cation of a Group I or Group II metal and a silica support. The alkali metal and/or alkaline earth metal cations of the catalyst can be used in a concentration of 0.01 to 0.20 equivalent, preferably 0.010 to 0.10 equivalent, of the cation per 100 grams of silica support, on a dry solids basis. Catalyst compositions found to be especially useful in the reaction to form an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid from a saturated monocarboxylic acid of one less carbon atom and formaldehyde are the subject of Hagen et al., United States patent application Serial No. 624,040, and Kaduk et al., United States patent application Serial No. 624,041, both filed June 25, 1984, both of which are specifically incorporated herein by reference in their entirety.

Suitable sources of alkali metal and alkaline earth metal cations include sodium hydroxide, potassium hydroxide, cesium hydroxide, lithium hydroxide, rubidium hydroxide, strontium hydroxide, magnesium hydroxide, lithium phosphate, trisodium phosphate, cesium phosphate, sodium borate, barium hydroxide, sodium carbonate, cesium fluoride, cesium nitrate, etc. Of these, the alkali metal cations are preferred.

While any commercially available colloidal silica can be used, it is preferred to use commercially available colloidal silicas having an average particle diameter of 40 to 1000 Angstrom units, particularly those having a particle diameter of about 50 to 250 Angstrom units, in order to produce silica-supported catalysts having a surface area of 20 to 275 m^2/g , a pore volume of 0.1 to 0.8 cc/g and an average pore diameter of about 75 to 200 Angstrom units, which are the subject of copending patent application Serial No. 624,040. As pointed out in patent application Serial No. 624,040, silica catalysts comprising at least one cation of a Group I or Group II metal and a silica support, said support having a surface

area of 20 to 275 m²/g, a pore volume of 0.1 to 0.8 cc/g and an average pore diameter of 75 to 200 Angstrom units, have relatively high activity (that is, percent conversion and selectivity) and relatively long life. Pore 5 volume, surface area and average pore diameter are inter-dependent variables. Other things being equal, holding one variable constant, as the surface area increases, pore volume increases; as the surface area increases, average pore diameter decreases; and as the pore volume 10 increases, average pore diameter increases. It is critical in patent application Serial No. 624,040 that the catalyst satisfy each of the pore volume, surface area and average pore diameter requirements.

The silica can be treated either prior to drying or 15 after calcination with cations. Catalysts prepared by the addition of the cations to the colloidal silica before or during gelation can be viewed as coformed catalysts which are the subject of copending patent application Serial No. 624,041. As pointed out in patent 20 application Serial No. 624,041, coformed catalysts are advantageous in the sense that they are substantially more water tolerant than catalysts prepared by the treatment of the calcined silica with an aqueous solution of the cation and they are easier to coke since, other 25 things being equal, they do not exotherm as much as catalysts prepared by impregnation. This is apparently due to the more uniform distribution of the cations in the support.

The silica supports are preferably prepared by 30 forming an aqueous composition comprising about 10 to 60 percent by weight colloidal silica on a dry basis and alkali metal and/or alkaline earth metal cation. The colloidal silica is gelled by adjusting the pH to a range of about 3 to 10, preferably about 6 to about 9, preferably with alkali metal or alkaline earth metal cations. 35 Salts such as NH₄NO₃ can be used to accelerate gelation. While silica hydrogels can be aged for two weeks or more,

aging seems to have no effect on the properties of the catalyst and accordingly, aging is not necessary. The composition is then dried by any suitable means, such as in a microwave oven, to constant weight and apparent dryness, for example, about 4 to 5 percent moisture on a dry solids basis. Apparently, only the water of hydration is retained by the silica gel after drying to constant weight. The silica gel is then calcined at about 300°C to 800°C, preferably about 300°C to 600°C.

In this preferred embodiment, the synthesis reactor feedstock should be composed of the saturated aliphatic monocarboxylic acid, formaldehyde, and some water. The mole ratio of the saturated aliphatic monocarboxylic acid to formaldehyde should be maintained within the range of from about 25:1 to about 1:25; with a preferred range of from about 2:1 to about 1:2. The preferred concentration of water in the reactor (including water formed during the reaction) is at least 3 weight percent water in the reactor contents.

The synthesis reaction takes place over a wide temperature range of from about 280°C to about 500°C. Desirable and advantageous results are obtained by operating with temperatures in the range of about 280°C to about 350°C. The process is normally run at atmospheric pressure, although higher or lower pressures can be used.

The space velocity of the vaporized feed mixture over the catalyst may be varied over wide limits. Space velocity figures in this specification are based on the total number of moles of materials entering the catalyst zone. Total moles are multiplied by the volume of a mole of an ideal gas at 0°C and one atmosphere (22.4 liters/mole), to obtain the total volume. A space velocity in the range from about 100 liters per hour per liter of catalyst to about 1000 liters per hour per liter of catalyst is preferred.

The synthesis reactor effluent stream contains water of reaction, one mole of water for each mole of the

alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid produced. An element of the preferred embodiment of the process of the invention is distillation of the reactor effluent stream under process conditions wherein 5 60-90 weight percent of the unreacted formaldehyde and 25-70 weight percent of the unreacted saturated monocarboxylic acid entering the distillation column are removed by a side-draw from the central part comprising from 10% to 90% of the theoretical trays of the distillation 10 column for recycle to the synthesis reactor. The distillation column overhead consists of water, a small amount of formaldehyde and a trace of the saturated monocarboxylic acid. The distillation column bottoms contain the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic 15 acid, the saturated monocarboxylic acid and the heavy by-products of the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid synthesis reaction. The distillation column temperatures depend on the pressure employed and the identity of the particular alpha-, beta-ethylenically 20 unsaturated monocarboxylic acid. When the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid is methacrylic acid, preferred distillation column conditions are:

25	Column Temperatures	
	Overhead, °C	71°-79°
	Side-Draw, °C	99°-121°
	Bottoms, °C	141°-157°
	Column Pressure, Atm.	1

30 The primary purpose of the reactor effluent distillation tower is to remove water from the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid synthesis reactor effluent. The overhead from this tower, consisting of formaldehyde, water and a small amount of the 35 saturated monocarboxylic acid, is sent to a formaldehyde recovery and dehydration section.

The bottoms from this tower consisting of the saturated aliphatic monocarboxylic acid reactant and unsaturated carboxylic acid product and heavy by-products are passed to a second distillation column operated under 5 vacuum to separate the saturated aliphatic monocarboxylic acid as overhead from the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid in the bottoms.

The present invention will be more clearly understood from the following specific examples.

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Examples 1-9

In each of Examples 1-9, an approximately 30-gram mixture containing propionic acid and methacrylic acid was introduced into a 3-necked 100-milliliter flask. 15 2,5-dimethylcyclopent-2-en-1-one (A) and the inhibitor 2,2,6,6-tetramethylpiperidine-1-oxyl (B) were also introduced. The lower half of the flask was inserted into a stirred oil bath which was maintained at the desired test temperature. The flask was equipped with a thermometer, 20 reflux condenser and a sparge tube through which nitrogen was sparged into the solution. After the flask was immersed in the oil bath, the contents of the flask reached the test temperature in 5-7 minutes. The time when polymerization occurred was determined by withdrawing small aliquots of the mixture from the flask at 25 frequent intervals and diluting each aliquot with an equal volume of dodecane to precipitate a polymer that formed. The time difference between the time when the solution in the flask reached the test temperature and 30 the time when the slightest haze appeared in a diluted aliquot was defined as the time to polymerization. Precipitation of solids generally occurred in 30-60 seconds after the haze appeared.

The weight ratio of propionic acid-to-methacrylic acid in the solution in the flask was 60:40 in each of Examples 1-4 and 7-9, 63:37 in Example 5, and 61:39 in Example 6. The concentration of A in the solution in the

5 flask was 1 weight percent in Examples 1-4 and 7-9 and 0.6 weight percent in Examples 5-6. The test temperature, weight percent of B in the solution in the flask, the weight percent of B in the solution in the flask divided by the weight percent of A in the solution in the flask, the number of parts of B per million parts by weight of methacrylic acid (MA) in the solution in the flask, and the time to polymerization for each of Examples 1-9 are presented in Table 1.

Examples 10-20

Examples 21-25

In each of Examples 21-25, the procedure of Examples 10-20 was repeated, except that in Examples 22, 23 and 25, 2,2,6,6-tetramethyl-4-oxopiperidine-1-oxyl was employed as the inhibitor instead of 2,2,6,6-tetramethyl-piperidine-1-oxyl. The test temperature was 116°C in each of Examples 21-25. The concentration of A in the solution in the flask was 3 weight percent in Examples 21-23 and 1.5 weight percent in Examples 24-25. The concentration of the inhibitor in the solution in the flask, the concentration of the inhibitor in the solution in the flask divided by the weight percent of A in the solution

Table 1

5	<u>Example</u>	Temp. (°C)	Conc. of	Conc. of	Time (min)
			B, based on A(Wt.%)	B, based on MA(ppm)	
	1	144	0.1	10	23
	2	143	0.05	5	11
	3	143	0.07	7	18
10	4	143	0.1	10	26
	5	143	0.04	7	16
	6	138	0.06	10	40
	7	138	0.05	5	20
	8	138	0.1	10	45
15	9	132	0.1	10	65

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Table 2

5	Example	Temp. (°C)	Conc. of B(Wt.%)	Conc. of B, based on A(Wt.%)	Conc. of B, based on MA(ppm)	Time (min)
10	10	132	0.1	10	1026	28
	11	121	0.1	10	1000	105
	12	116	0.1	10	1000	270
	13	116	0.01	0.33	100	<1
	14	116	0.1	3.3	1000	90
	15	116	0.05	1.7	500	10
	16	116	0.075	5.0	760	150
	17	99	0.03	1.0	306	105
	18	99	0.02	0.7	200	45
	19	99	0.03	2.0	315	183
	20	121	0.1	7.0	1066	105

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in the flask, the number of parts by weight of the inhibitor per million parts of methacrylic acid (MA) in the solution in the flask, and the time to polymerization for each of Examples 21-25 are presented in Table 3.

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Examples 26-27

In each of Examples 26 and 27, a feed comprising propionic acid and formaldehyde in a molar ratio of 0.95 moles of propionic acid per mole of formaldehyde was fed continuously to a vapor phase reactor containing a bed of 10 a catalyst comprising 5 weight percent of cesium hydroxide (calculated as elemental cesium) on silica having a surface area of $150 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$ and maintained at a temperature of 324°C and a pressure of 4 psig. The propionic acid and formaldehyde reacted to form methacrylic 15 acid, and the reactor effluent was fed to a first distillation column which was operated at atmospheric pressure and an overhead temperature of 76°C , a side-draw temperature of 115°C and a bottoms temperature of 147°C and contained 40 inches of packing material disposed above 20 20 Oldershaw trays. The mixture was introduced at the level of the 18th tray from the bottom. The polymerization inhibitor was dissolved in propionic acid and introduced into this column at the level of the 20th tray from the bottom. Methacrylic acid, propionic acid and heavy reaction 25 by-products were recovered as a bottoms product, and passed to a second distillation column which was operated at a pressure of 100 millimeters of mercury (measured at the top of the column), an overhead temperature of 87°C and a bottoms temperature of 116°C and contained 35 30 35 Oldershaw trays. The polymerization inhibitor was dissolved in propionic acid and introduced into this column near its top. Methacrylic acid and heavy reaction by-products were recovered as a bottoms product.

The system was operated at steady state, and the following data were collected over a 2-hour period during steady state operation. In each of Examples 26 and 27, approximately 3,170 grams of propionic acid and 1,373

Table 3

5	Example	Conc. of	Conc. of B,	Time (min.)
		Inhibitor (Wt.%)	Inhibitor, based on A(Wt.%)	
10	21	0.1	3.3	1000 90
	22	0.1	3.7	1144 60
	23	0.1	3.7	1147 60
	24	0.075	5.0	760 150
	25	0.075	5.5	831 90

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grams of formaldehyde were fed to the vapor phase reactor during the 2-hour period. In Example 26, the first and second distillation columns were operated at reflux ratios of 1.9 and 3.6, respectively. In Example 27, the 5 first and second distillation columns were operated at reflux ratios of 2.2 and 2.9, respectively. 3.22 grams and 1.31 grams of 2,2,6,6-tetramethyl-4-oxopiperidine-1-oxyl as the inhibitor were introduced into the first and second distillation columns, respectively, in Example 10 26 during the 2-hour period. 2.89 grams and 1.19 grams of 2,2,6,6-tetramethylpiperidine-1-oxyl as the inhibitor were introduced into the first and second distillation columns, respectively, in Example 27 during the 2-hour period. In Examples 26 and 27, the bottoms from the 15 second distillation column weighed 1,189 grams and 1,122 grams, respectively, of which approximately 85 weight percent was methacrylic acid. 0.68 weight percent and 0.63 weight percent of the bottoms from the second distillation column in Examples 26 and 27, respectively, were precipitated as polymeric solids upon dilution with an equal 20 volume of dodecane.

The results of Examples 1-20 illustrate that the polymerization time is a function of the distillation temperature. At a particular distillation temperature, the polymerization time varies inversely with the concentration of the polymerization inhibitor divided by the 25 concentration of the polymerization accelerator (A). Obviously the concentration of the polymerization inhibitor that should be employed to effect the desired inhibition depends on the identities of the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid, of the polymerization accelerator (for example, 2,5-dimethylcyclopent-2-en-1-one) present, and of the inhibitor employed, the amount of polymerization accelerator present, the levated temperature, and the time for 30 which the alpha-, beta- ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid is exposed to the elevated temperature.

Furthermore, by contrast to the steady state operations illustrated by Examples 26 and 27, when a nitroxide free radical polymerization inhibitor of the type employed in the method of this invention was not 5 employed, polymerization and deposition of solid polymers occurred so quickly that the system could not be operated long enough to establish steady state conditions.

From the above description, it is apparent that the objects of the present invention have been achieved. 10 While only certain embodiments have been set forth, alternative embodiments and various modifications will be apparent from the above description to those skilled in the art. These and other alternatives are considered equivalents and within the spirit and scope of the present invention. 15

Having described the invention, what is claimed is:

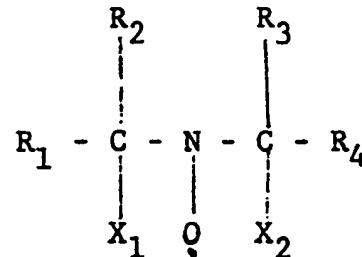
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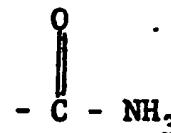
1. A process for the purification of an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid by distillation, comprising adding to the distillation feedstock a nitroxide free radical having the essential skeletal structure:



wherein each of R_1 , R_2 , R_3 and R_4 is an alkyl group containing from 1 to 15 carbon atoms, X_1 and X_2 are the same or different, and each of X_1 and X_2 is an alkyl group containing from 1 to 15 carbon atoms, halogen, cyanide, or



wherein R_5 is an alkyl group containing from 1 to 15 carbon atoms or an aryl group containing from 6 to 12 carbon atoms,



$-S$, $-C_6H_5$, $-S-COCH_3$, $-OCOCH_3$, $-OCOC_2H_5$ or an alkenyl group containing up to 15 carbon atoms where the double bond is not in conjugation with the group



or X_1 and X_2 taken together form a ring.

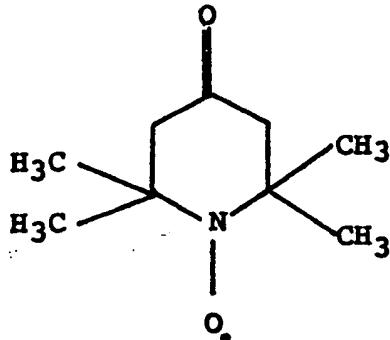
2. A process according to Claim 1 wherein the acid is methacrylic acid.

3. A process according to Claim 1 or Claim 2 wherein R_1 , R_2 , R_3 and R_4 are each methyl, ethyl or propyl groups.

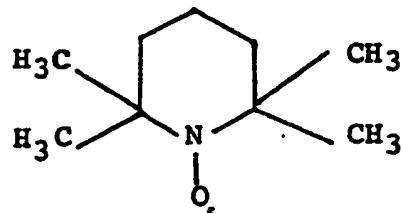
4. A process according to any preceding claim wherein X_1 and X_2 taken together with the carbon atoms to which they are attached and the nitrogen of the N-O group form a ring.

5. A process according to Claim 4 wherein the nitroxid radical is a piperidine-1-oxyl or a pyrrolidine-1-oxyl.

6. A process according to Claim 5 wherein the nitroxide radical is 2,2,6,6-tetramethyl-4-oxopiperidine-1-oxyl of the formula:



7. A process according to Claim 5 wherein the nitroxide is 2,2,6,6-tetramethylpiperidine-1-oxyl of the formula:



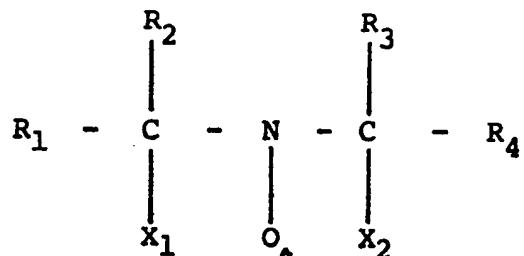
8. A process according to any preceding claim wherein the distillation is conducted at a temperature in the range of from about 65°C to about 175°C.

9. A process according to any preceding claim wherein the distillation feedstock comprises propionic acid.

10. A process according to any preceding claim wherein the distillation feedstock comprises an alpha-, beta unsaturated ketone.

11. A process according to any preceding claim wherein the distillation feedstock comprises from about 1 to about 10,000 parts of the nitroxide radical per million parts of the alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid.

12. A process for the purification of an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid by distillation, comprising adding to the distillation feedstock a nitroxide free radical having the essential skeletal structure:



wherein each of R_1 , R_2 , R_3 and R_4 is an alkyl group containing from 1 to 15 carbon atoms, the remaining valencies being satisfied by any atoms or groups other than hydrogen which can bond covalently to carbon and which do not destroy the stabilizing effect of the nitroxide group.

13. The use of a nitroxide-free radical containing compound to stabilize an alpha-, beta-ethylenically unsaturated monocarboxylic acid.